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Mineral King for the Many

The Supreme Court, in a narrow division over a technical matter, has delayed a decision in the controversy over Mineral King. So the battle lines remain drawn between those who want to keep it largely as it is and those who support its exploitation as a major recreation area.

The court majority declined to deal with the merits of the Mineral King case, but it affirmed an important principle:

"Aesthetic and environmental well-being, like economic well-being, are important ingredients of the quality of life in our society, and the fact that particular environmental interests are shared by the many rather than the few does not make them less deserving of legal protection through the judicial process."

The Sierra Club has until the middle of May to amend its action to try again to gain standing in court to fight the proposed development. If the club succeeds, the U.S. District Court can get on with the merits of the case.

We remain convinced that the public interest will be served by implementing the original plan of the U.S. Forest Service which led, in 1969, to the $35 million development proposal of Walt Disney Enterprises. Our support of this kind of development is based on the need to balance recreation. But we recognize the legitimate doubts of many, doubts which can only be resolved by a test against the standards set by the Supreme Court.

The 15,000 acres of Mineral King are within Sequoia National Forest, surrounded on three sides by Sequoia National Park. The valley area, where the new buildings will be concentrated, already is developed. Natural bowls above would become the ski centers.

Mineral King has been under consideration as a winter sports area for 30 years because Forest Service officials have believed it has unique potential. It would be within four hours of Los Angeles by car. The elevation would guarantee at least six months of skiing a year. As outlined by the Disney interests, it could accommodate 14,000 visitors a day, including more than 3,000 overnight guests and more than 8,000 skiers.

There are some worries.

No one can be sure that full development, as outlined by Disney, would not dangerously damage the environment. So the National Forest Service is now proposing staged development, with a cutoff if the impact on the region reaches a danger level. But no formula for guaranteeing these protections has yet been made public.

The access road now proposed would be built at an estimated cost of $27 million, to be paid by California taxpayers, not by Disney. It would pass through almost 10 miles of the National Park with no way to limit access or control traffic. There remains, however, a reasonable suspicion that alternatives for access have not been exhausted. A pollution-free rail line, for example, may prove feasible. And a toll road could be arranged through special legislation to shift the burden to the users while also limiting traffic.

But, all in all, there appears no site where so much good recreation can be developed for so many with minimum risk to nature.

This is not to ignore the importance of wilderness. Within the national forests in California there already are 1,596,000 acres declared as wilderness and 357,000 more dedicated as primitive areas. Furthermore, next month the Forest Service will conduct hearings to consider adding another 3 million acres in the state to the national wilderness preservation system.

There is a need for balance as the lands of California are considered for development and for conservation. In the balance for recreation, the development of Mineral King is justified.